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(54) **IMAGE PICKUP CIRCUIT**

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CPC H04N 5/3595; H04N 5/3728; H04N 5/2175; H04N 3/155; H04N 5/378; H04N 5/335; H04N 5/37455; H04N 5/3741; H04N 5/3658

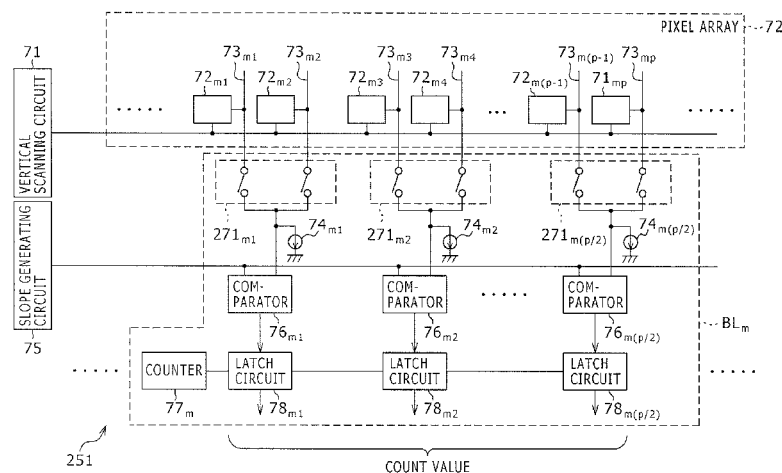
See application file for complete search history.

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ABSTRACT

An image pickup circuit including a plurality of circuit blocks. Each of the plurality of circuit blocks includes a plurality of comparing elements, a single counter, and a plurality of storage units. Each of the comparing elements compares a pixel signal supplied through a vertical signal line connected to vertically aligned pixels in a plurality of pixels arranged in a matrix, and a slope signal whose voltage is changed from an initial voltage at a constant slope. The counter counts an elapsed time since a voltage of the slope signal starts to change from the initial voltage. Each of the storage units stores a count value obtained by the counter in accordance with a comparison result of the comparator, the count value corresponding to an elapsed time until the voltage of the slope signal is changed from the initial voltage to a voltage coinciding with the pixel signal.

20 Claims, 8 Drawing Sheets



Related U.S. Application Data

continuation of application No. 13/343,177, filed on Jan. 4, 2012, now Pat. No. 9,041,839, which is a continuation of application No. 12/197,372, filed on Aug. 25, 2008, now Pat. No. 8,102,449.

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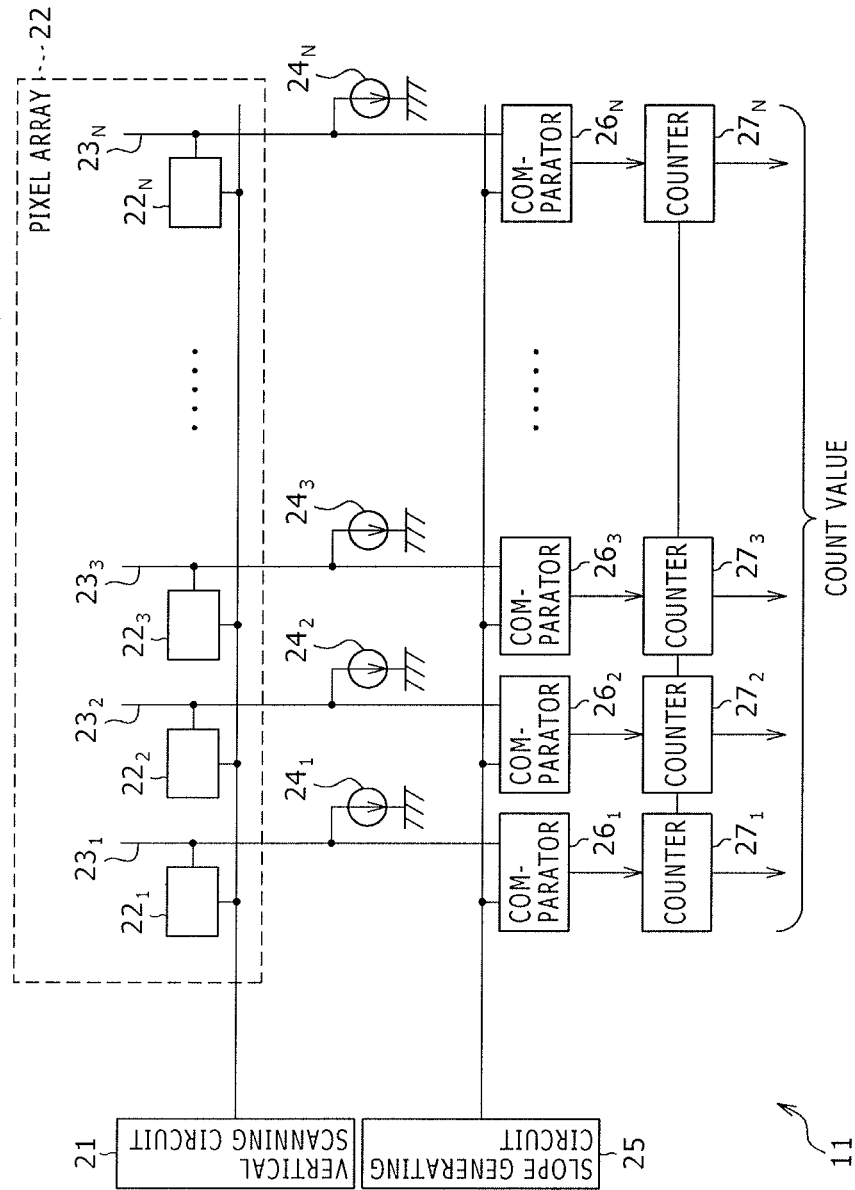
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Related Art

FIG. 1



Related Art

FIG. 2

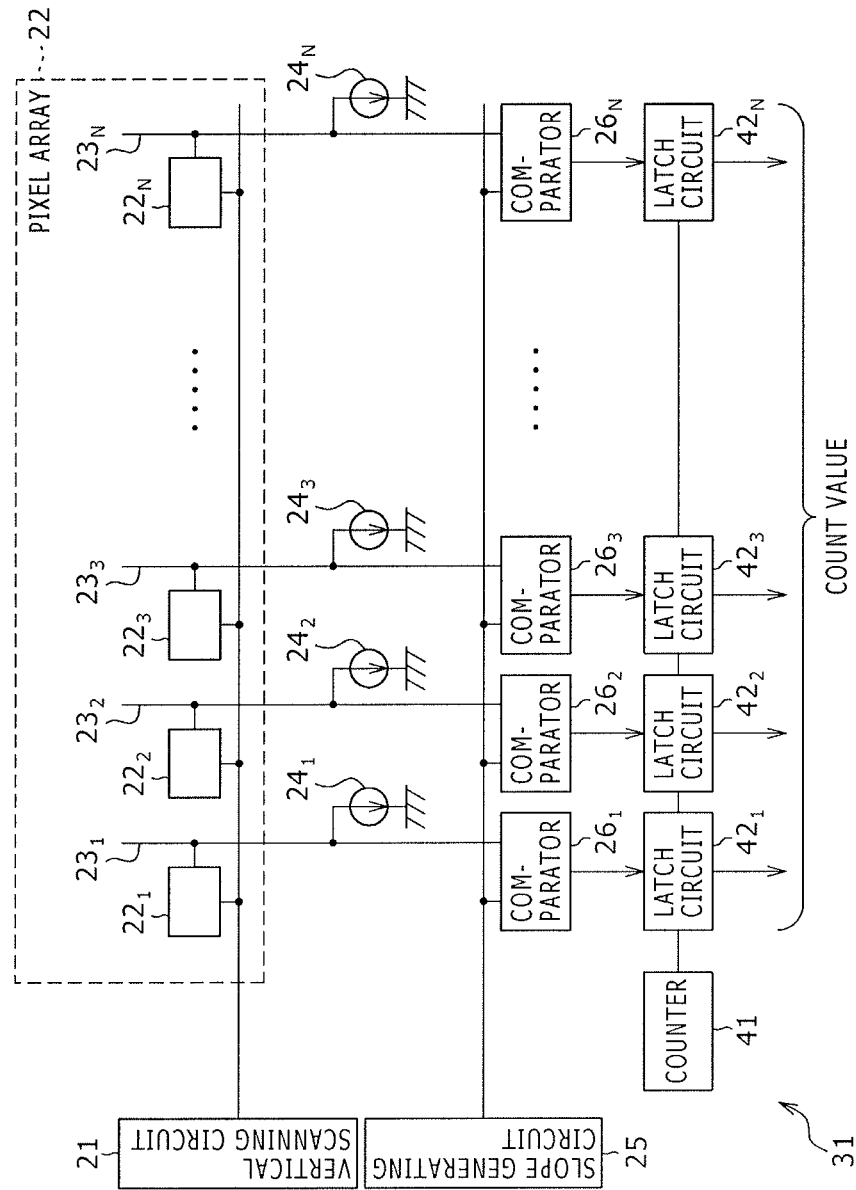


FIG. 3.

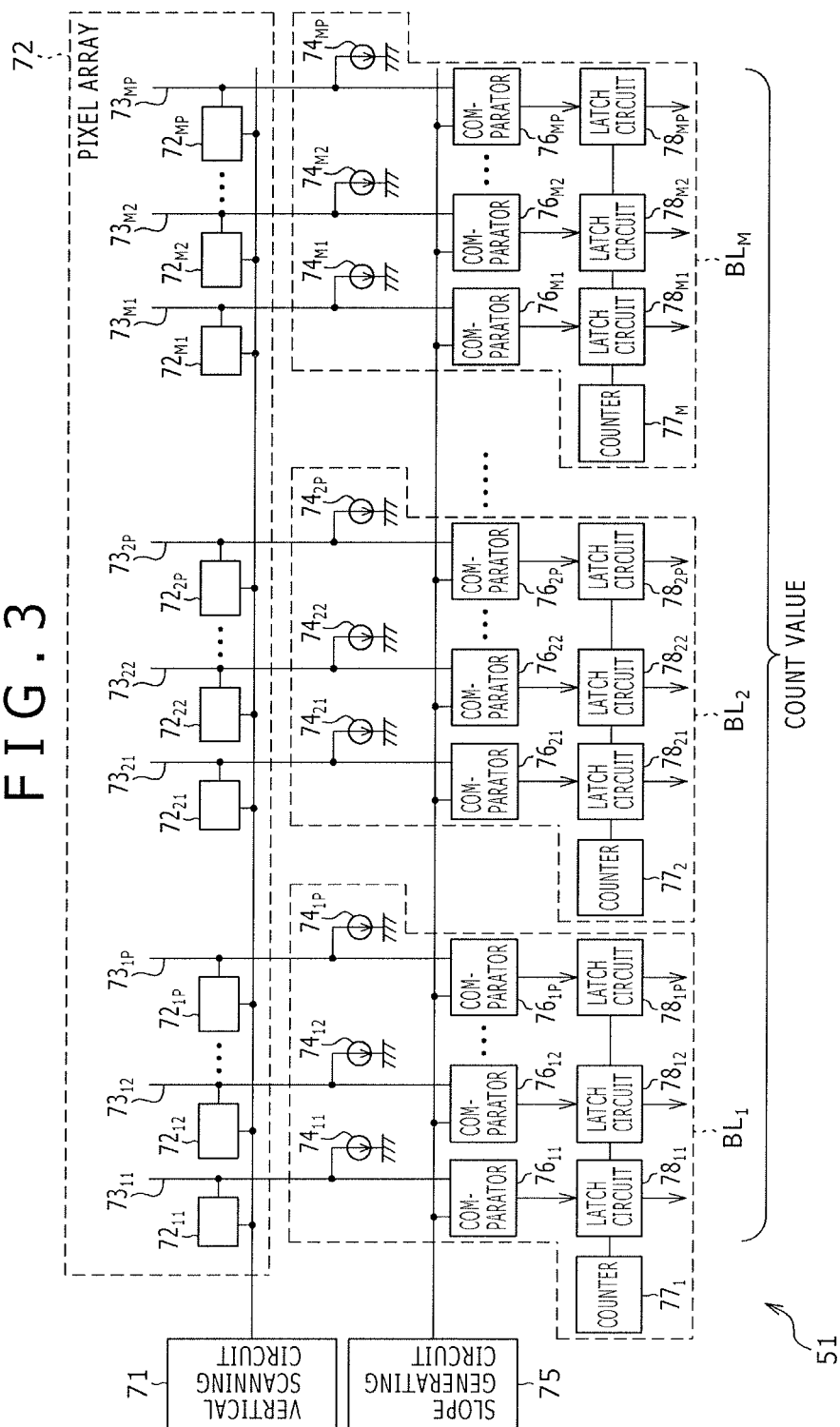


FIG. 4

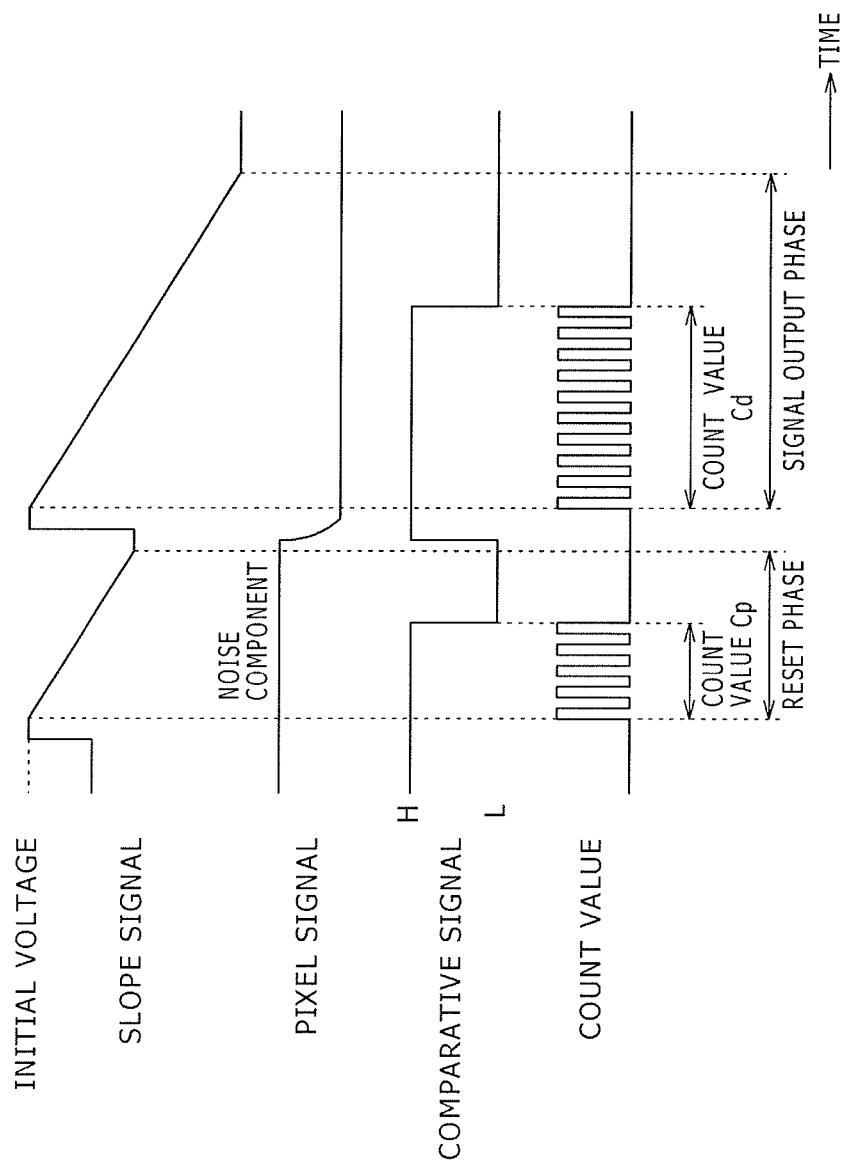


FIG. 5

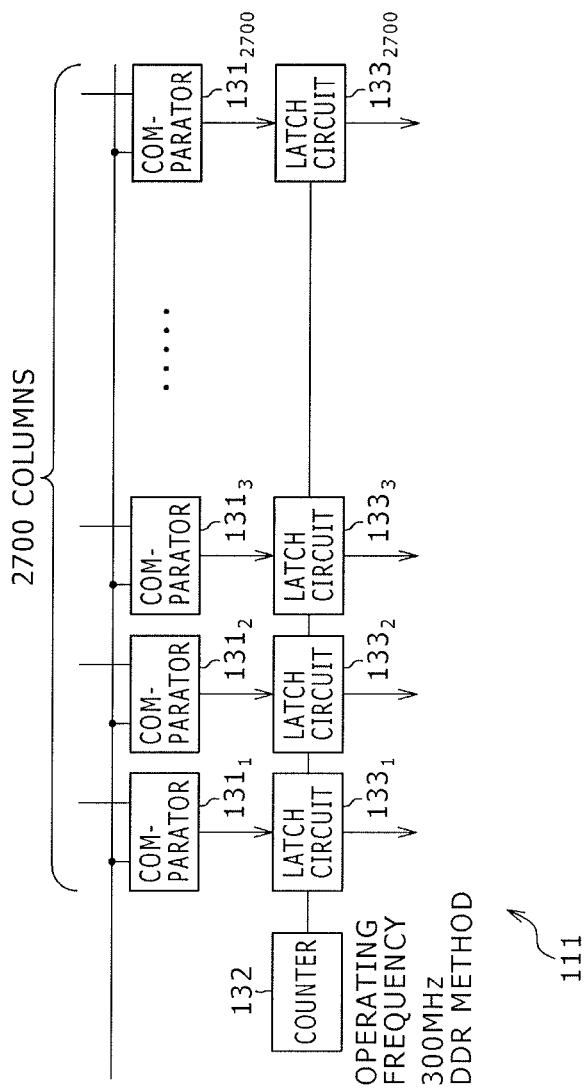
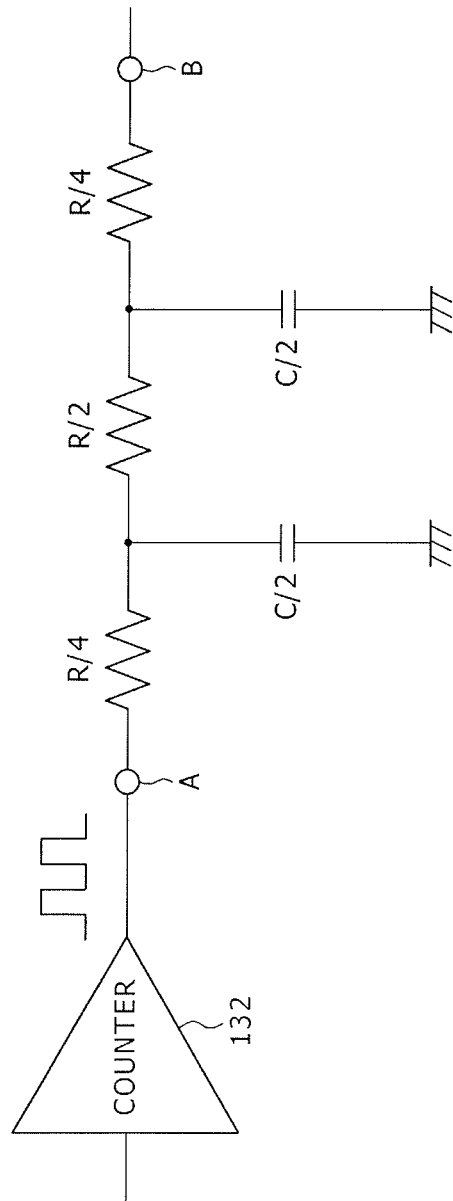


FIG. 6



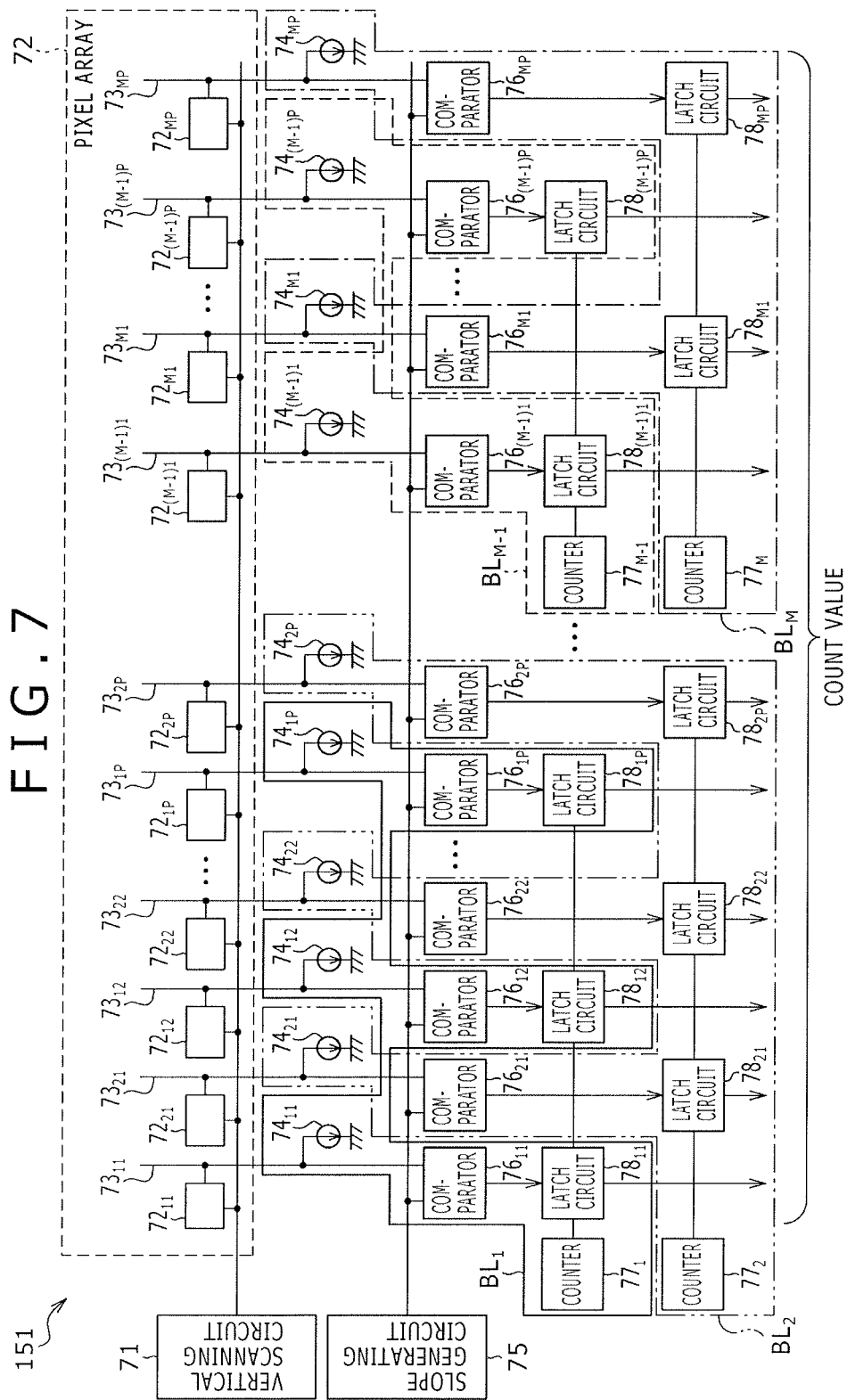


FIG. 8.

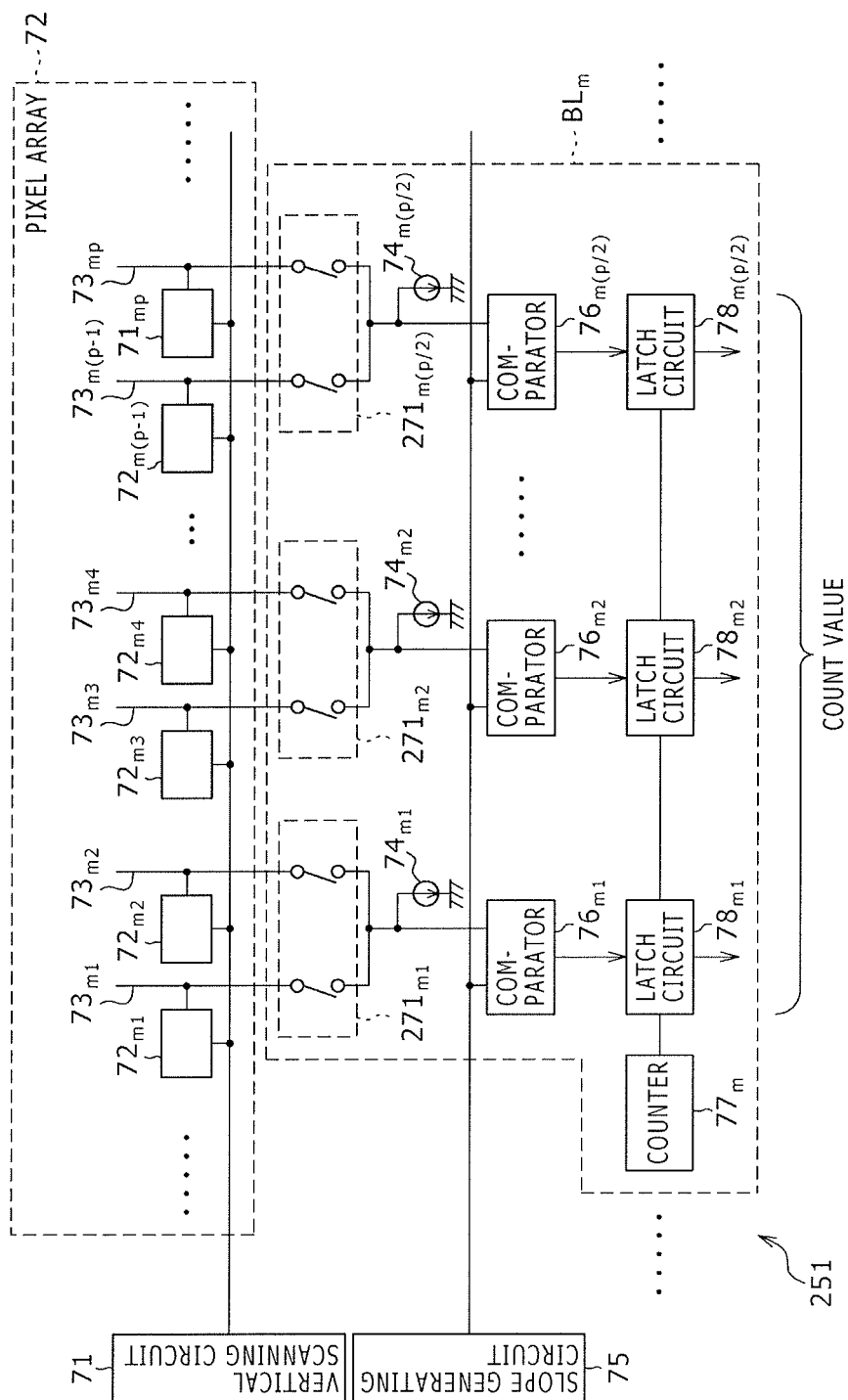


IMAGE PICKUP CIRCUIT

RELATED APPLICATION DATA

The present application claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. §120 as a continuation application of U.S. application Ser. No. 14/963,132, filed Dec. 8, 2015, which is a continuation application of U.S. application Ser. No. 14/689,883, filed Apr. 17, 2015, which is a continuation application of U.S. application Ser. No. 13/343,177, filed Jan. 4, 2012, now U.S. Pat. No. 9,041,839, issued on May 26, 2015, which is a continuation application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/197,372, filed Aug. 25, 2008, now U.S. Pat. No. 8,102,449, issued on Jan. 24, 2012, which in turn claims priority to Japanese Patent Application No. JP 2007-225208 filed on Aug. 31, 2007, the entire contents of each of which is incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to an image pickup circuit.

In the recent years, solid-state image pickup devices such as CMOS (complementary metal oxide semiconductor) sensors have been widely implemented to portable telephones, compact digital cameras, high-class single-lens reflex cameras, camcorders, monitor cameras and guide apparatuses.

Recently, there has been developed a high performance sensor including an on-chip processing blocks such as an image processing circuit together with a CMOS sensor to thereby output high quality images.

For example, sensors employing column-parallel A/D (analog to digital) conversion method (hereinafter referred to for convenience to as "column AD method") have been proposed.

In the column AD method, an A/D converter is provided for every column of pixels (hereinafter referred to as a "column" where appropriate), and the pixel signals (analog signals) of individual pixels for the respective columns are read by one operation and then A/D converted directly.

Further, the column AD method employs parallel processing for every horizontal line in an image, thus eliminating the necessity for high-frequency horizontal scanning. This enables the A/D conversion to be performed vertically at a low frequency, making it easy to separate signal components and noise components generated in a high frequency band.

The configuration of a solid-state image pickup device employing the column AD method will be described here with reference to FIGS. 1 and 2.

FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing the configuration of an example of the solid-state image pickup device employing the column AD method.

In FIG. 1, a solid-state image pickup device 11 includes a vertical scanning circuit 21, a pixel array 22, vertical signal lines 23₁ to 23_N (N is a positive integer), current sources 24₁ to 24_N, a slope generating circuit 25, comparators 26₁ to 26_N, and counters 27₁ to 27_N.

Under control of the controller (not shown), the vertical scanning circuit 21 supplies sequentially output control signals for controlling the outputs of pixel signals to vertically aligned pixels 22₁ to 22_N in the pixel array 22 at a predetermined timing.

The pixel array 22 is composed of a plurality of pixels arranged in a matrix. FIG. 1 shows the pixels 22₁ to 22_N disposed in a horizontal direction for one line, with the vertically aligned pixels omitted. In the pixel array 22, the individual pixels 22_n which are vertically aligned output

sequentially a pixel signal on the basis of the output control signal supplied from the vertical scanning circuit 21.

In the pixel array 22 of FIG. 1, the N pixels 22₁ to 22_N are disposed horizontally (horizontal direction). The pixels 22_n (n=1, 2, . . . , N) photoelectrically convert the incident light, and output the pixel signal of a voltage corresponding to the light. These pixels 22₁ to 22_N are connected to the N vertical signal lines 23₁ to 23_N, respectively, and the pixel signals outputted from the pixels 22₁ to 22_N are supplied through the vertical signal lines 23₁ to 23_N to one of two input terminals in each of the N comparators 26₁ to 26_N, respectively. The pixels 22₁ to 22_N are also grounded through the N current sources 24₁ to 24_N, respectively.

The slope generating circuit 25 supplies a slope signal, whose voltage drops (or rises) at a constant slope from a predetermined initial voltage, to the other of the two input terminals in each of the N comparators 26₁ to 26_N, respectively.

The comparators 26₁ to 26_N compare the pixel signals supplied from the pixels 22₁ to 22_N, and the slope signal supplied from the slope generating circuit 25, and supply comparative signals representing the comparison results to the N counters 27₁ to 27_N, respectively.

The counters 27₁ to 27_N count a predetermined clock signal on the basis of the comparative signals supplied from the comparators 26₁ to 26_N, respectively, and supply the count values to the circuit of the subsequent stage (not shown). In the circuit of the subsequent stage, pixel data (pixel values) are outputted on the basis of the count values supplied from the counters 27₁ to 27_N.

In FIG. 1, the slope generating circuit 25, the comparators 26_n, and the counters 27_n constitute the A/D converter.

The solid-state image pickup device 11 thus configured necessitates the counters corresponding to the number N of the columns, thereby increasing the circuit area and power consumption.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram showing the configuration of other example of the solid-state image pickup device employing the column AD method.

In FIG. 2, the same references have been used as in FIG. 1 for similar components, and the description thereof is omitted.

In FIG. 2, a solid-state image pickup device 31 includes a vertical scanning circuit 21, a pixel array 22, vertical signal lines 23₁ to 23_N, current sources 24₁ to 24_N, a slope generating circuit 25, comparators 26₁ to 26_N, a counter 41, and latch circuits 42₁ to 42_N.

Each of the comparators 26₁ to 26_N supply comparative signals representing the comparison results, to the N latch circuits 42₁ to 42_N, respectively. The comparative signals are obtained by comparing the pixel signals supplied from the pixels 22₁ to 22_N and the slope signal supplied from the slope generating circuit 25.

The counter 41 counts a predetermined clock signal and supplies the count value to the latch circuits 42₁ to 42_N, respectively.

The latch circuits 42₁ to 42_N store the count values counted by the single counter 41 in response to the comparative signals from the comparators 26₁ to 26_N, and supply the stored count values to the circuit of the subsequent stage (not shown). In the circuit of the subsequent stage, pixel data are outputted on the basis of the count values supplied from the latch circuits 42₁ to 42_N.

In FIG. 2, the slope generating circuit 25, the comparators 26_n, the counter 41, and the latch circuits 42_n constitute the A/D converter.

The solid-state image pickup device **31** thus configured can reduce the number of counters to only one, namely the counter **41**.

However, when the single counter **41** is provided as in the solid-state image pickup device **31**, a greater distance between the counter **41** and the latch circuit **42_n**, causes a greater delay in counted pulse indicating the count value supplied from the counter **41** to the latch circuit **42_n**, due to wire resistance and wire capacity. Consequently, between the column of the latch circuit **42_n**, having a short distance to the counter **41**, and the column of the latch circuit **42_{n'}** ($n'=1, 2, \dots, N$) having a long distance to the counter **41**, a difference resulted from wire resistance and wire capacity occurs in pixel data outputted, thereby adversely affecting image quality.

There are also those having a plurality of arrangements that an A/D converter (a comparator and a counter) is shared among a plurality of columns (for example, see Japanese Unexamined Patent Application Publication No. 2006-80861 hereinafter referred to as Patent Document 1).

However, in the configuration of the Patent Document 1, the pixel signals of a plurality of columns are serially transmitted to be A/D converted, thus lowering the transmission rate. The counter is required to operate for a number of columns, and the power consumption thereof becomes the same as the power consumption when each of the columns has a counter.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

As described above, it has been difficult for the earlier developed solid-state image pickup devices to reduce power consumption.

Accordingly, it is desirable to reduce power consumption.

In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image pickup circuit which includes a plurality of circuit blocks each including a plurality of comparing elements, a single counter, and a plurality of storage units. Each of the plurality of comparing elements compare a pixel signal supplied through a vertical signal line connected to vertically aligned pixels in a plurality of pixels arranged in a matrix, and a slope signal whose voltage is changed from an initial voltage at a constant slope. The single counter counts an elapsed time since a voltage of the slope signal is started to change from the initial voltage. Each of the plurality of storage units store a count value obtained by the counter, in accordance with a comparison result of the comparing elements, the count value corresponding to an elapsed time until the voltage of the slope signal is changed from the initial voltage to a voltage coinciding with the pixel signal.

In one embodiment, a pixel column in one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks may be arranged between two adjacent pixel columns aligned vertically in another one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks.

In one embodiment, a pixel signal of a pixel in the pixel column in one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks and a pixel signal of a pixel in the pixel column aligned vertically in another one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks may be added.

In one embodiment, a pixel signal of a pixel in the pixel column in one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks arranged between two adjacent pixel columns aligned vertically in another one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks may be thinned out.

In one embodiment, the storage unit may include a latch circuit or a sample-hold circuit.

The circuit blocks may further include selecting elements for selecting the pixel signals supplied from the plurality of the vertical signal lines to supply the selected pixel signals to the comparators.

According to one embodiment, in the plurality of circuit blocks, the plurality of comparators compare a pixel signal supplied through the vertical signal line connected to the vertically aligned pixels in the plurality of pixels arranged in the matrix, and the slope signal whose voltage is changed at the constant slope from the predetermined initial voltage. In accordance with the comparison result of the comparators, the plurality of storage units store the count value obtained by the single counter, corresponding to the elapsed time until the slope signal voltage is changed from the initial voltage to the voltage coinciding with the pixel signal.

According to an embodiment of the present invention, the image pickup circuit is capable of reducing power consumption.

The above summary of the present invention is not intended to describe each illustrated embodiment or every implementation of the present invention. The figures and the detailed description which follow more particularly exemplify these embodiments.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing the configuration of an embodiment of a solid-state image pickup device employing column AD method;

FIG. 2 is a block diagram showing the configuration of other embodiment of the solid-state image pickup device employing the column AD method;

FIG. 3 is a block diagram showing a configuration example of an embodiment of the solid-state image pickup device to which the present invention is applied;

FIG. 4 is a time chart for explaining the operation of the solid-state image pickup device;

FIG. 5 is a block diagram showing a configuration example of a solid-state image pickup device in which a counter is shared among all columns;

FIG. 6 is a circuit diagram modeling wire resistance and wire capacity generated in the solid-state image pickup device of FIG. 5;

FIG. 7 is a block diagram showing a configuration example of other embodiment of the solid-state image pickup device to which the present invention is applied; and

FIG. 8 is a block diagram showing a configuration example of still other embodiment of the solid-state image pickup device to which the present invention is applied.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS

Before describing the following embodiments of the invention, the association between the configuration requirements of the invention and the embodiments described and shown in the specification or the drawings will be described below. That is, the following is to confirm that the embodiments supporting the invention are described and shown in the specification or the drawings. Even if there is a certain embodiment which is described in the specification or the drawings but not described here as an embodiment corresponding to a certain configuration requirement of the invention, it does not mean that this embodiment does not correspond to this configuration requirement. Conversely, even if a certain embodiment is described as one corre-

sponding to a certain configuration requirement, it does not mean that the embodiment does not correspond to any configuration requirement other than that.

The image pickup circuit of one embodiment of the invention includes a plurality of circuit blocks (e.g. circuit blocks BL_1 to BL_M in FIG. 3), each having a plurality of comparing elements (e.g. comparators 76_{m1} to 76_{mP} in FIG. 3), a counter (e.g. a counter 77_m in FIG. 3) and a plurality of storage units (e.g. latch circuits 78_{m1} to 78_{mP} in FIG. 3). Each of the plurality of comparing elements compares a pixel signal supplied through a vertical signal line connected to vertically aligned pixels in a plurality of pixels arranged in a matrix, and a slope signal whose voltage is changed from a predetermined initial voltage at a constant slope. The counter counts an elapsed time since a voltage of the slope signal is started to change from the initial voltage. Each of the plurality of storage units stores a count value obtained by the counter, in accordance with a comparison result of the comparing elements, the count value corresponding to an elapsed time until the voltage of the slope signal is changed from the initial voltage to a voltage coinciding with the pixel signal.

A pixel column aligned vertically in a circuit block (e.g. a circuit block BL_2 in FIG. 7) among the plurality of circuit blocks may be arranged between two adjacent pixel columns aligned vertically in another one circuit block (e.g. a circuit block BL_1 in FIG. 7).

In one embodiment, the image pickup device may be configured to add a pixel signal of a pixel (e.g. a pixel 72_{11} in FIG. 7) of the pixel column aligned vertically in the one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks, and a pixel signal of a pixel (e.g. a pixel 72_{21} in FIG. 7) of the pixel column aligned vertically in the another one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks.

In one embodiment, the image pickup device may be configured to thin out the pixel signals of pixels (e.g. pixels 72_{21} to 72_{2P} in FIG. 7) of the pixel columns vertically aligned in one circuit block among the plurality of circuit blocks, wherein the pixel columns are arranged between the two adjacent pixel columns aligned vertically in another one circuit block, the pixel columns each having pixels (e.g. pixels 72_{11} to 72_{1P} in FIG. 7).

The circuit blocks may further include selecting elements (e.g. switches 271_{m1} to $271_{m(P/2)}$) in FIG. 8) for selecting the pixel signals supplied from the plurality of vertical signal lines to supply the selected pixel signals to the comparing elements.

Embodiments of the present invention will be described below with reference to the accompanying drawings.

FIG. 3 is block diagram showing a configuration example of the solid-state image pickup device according to an embodiment of the present invention.

A solid-state image pickup device 51 of FIG. 3 may be, for example, a CMOS sensor or other solid-state image pickup device.

In FIG. 3, the solid-state image pickup device 51 includes one vertical scanning circuit 71, one pixel array 72, vertical signal lines the number of which is $M \times P$, 73_{11} to 73_{1P} , 73_{21} to 73_{2P} , . . . , and 73_{M1} to 73_{MP} (each M and P is a positive integer, particularly an integer equal to or greater than 2), current sources 74_{11} to 74_{1P} , the number of which is $M \times P$, 74_{21} to 74_{2P} , . . . , and 74_{M1} to 74_{MP} , one slope generating circuit 75, comparators the number of which is $M \times P$, 76_{11} to 76_{1P} , 76_{21} to 76_{2P} , . . . , and 76_{M1} to 76_{MP} , counters the number of which is M, 77_1 to 77_M , and latch circuits the number of which is $M \times P$, 78_{11} to 78_{1P} , 78_{21} to 78_{2P} , . . . , and 78_{M1} to 78_{MP} .

For the sake of convenience, the arrangement of the vertical signal lines 73_{11} to 73_{1P} , 73_{21} to 73_{2P} , . . . , and 73_{M1} to 73_{MP} are hereinafter referred to as "vertical signal lines 73_{11} to 73_{MP} ", or "vertical signal lines 73_{mp} ($m=1, 2, \dots$, and M ; $p=1, 2, \dots$, and P).". The same is applied to other arrangements.

Similarly, the arrangement made up of P vertical signal lines 73_{m1} to 73_{mP} , P current sources 74_{m1} to 74_{mP} , P comparators 76_{m1} to 76_{mP} , a counter 77_m , and P latch circuits 78_{m1} to 78_{mP} is hereinafter referred to as a "circuit block BL_m ". In this case, the solid-state image pickup device 51 includes a vertical scanning circuit 71, a pixel array 72, a slope generating circuit 75, and circuit blocks BL_1 to BL_M the number of which is M.

Under control of a controller (not shown), the vertical scanning circuit 71 supplies sequentially output control signals for controlling the outputs of pixel signals to the pixels 72_{11} to 72_{MP} arranged vertically in the pixel array 72 at a predetermined timing.

The pixel array 72 is composed of a plurality of pixels arranged in a matrix. FIG. 3 shows the pixels 72_{11} to 72_{MP} horizontally aligned in one column, with vertically aligned pixels omitted. In the pixel array 72, the vertically aligned individual pixels 72_{mp} output sequentially pixel signals on the basis of the output control signal supplied from the vertical scanning circuit 71.

In the pixel array 72 of FIG. 3, the pixels 72_{11} to 72_{MP} the number of which is $M \times P$ are arranged horizontally. The pixel 72_{mp} photoelectrically converts the incident light, and outputs the pixel signal of a voltage corresponding to the light. These pixels 72_{11} to 72_{MP} are connected to the $M \times P$ vertical signal lines 73_{11} to 73_{MP} , respectively, and the pixel signals outputted from the pixels 72_{11} to 72_{MP} are supplied through the vertical signal lines 73_{11} to 73_{MP} to one of two input terminals in each of the comparators 76_{11} to 76_{MP} the number of which is $M \times P$, respectively. The pixels 72_{11} to 72_{MP} are also grounded through the $M \times P$ current sources 74_{11} to 74_{MP} , respectively.

The slope generating circuit 75 supplies a slope signal, whose voltage is changed, namely drop (or rise), at a constant slope from an initial voltage, to the other of the two input terminals in each of the comparators 76_{11} to 76_{MP} , respectively.

The comparators 76_{11} to 76_{MP} compare the pixel signals supplied from the pixels 72_{11} to 72_{MP} and the slope signal supplied from the slope generating circuit 75, and supply comparative signals representing the comparison results to the latch circuits the number of which is $M \times P$, 78_{11} to 78_{MP} , respectively.

The counters 77_m count a predetermined clock signal in a circuit block BL_m , and supply the count value to the latch circuits 78_{m1} to 78_{mP} .

More specifically, the counter 77_1 supplies the count value of a clock signal to the latch circuits 78_{11} to 78_{1P} in the circuit block BL_1 , and the counter 77_2 supplies the count value of a clock signal to the latch circuits 78_{21} to 78_{2P} in the circuit block BL_2 .

Similarly, the counter 77_M supplies the count value of a clock signal to the latch circuits 78_{M1} to 78_{MP} in the circuit block BL_M .

In accordance with the comparative signal from the comparator 76_{mp} , the latch circuit 78_{mp} stores (latches) the count value counted by the counters 77_m in the circuit blocks BL_m , and supplies the stored count value to the circuit of the subsequent stage (not shown). In the circuit of the subsequent stage, pixel data are outputted on the basis of the count values supplied from the latch circuits 78_{m1} to 78_{mP} .

The slope generating circuit **75**, and the comparator **76_{mp}**, the counters **77_m**, and the latch circuit **78_{mp}** in the circuit blocks **BL_m** constitute the A/D converter.

Next, the operation of the solid-state image pickup device **51** will be described with reference to FIG. 4.

FIG. 4 is a timing chart for explaining the operation of the solid-state image pickup device **51**.

The following is the operation of the solid-state image pickup device **51**, focusing on the p-th pixel **72_{mp}** of the circuit blocks **BL_m**.

In FIG. 4, a slope signal supplied from the slope generating circuit **75** to the comparator **76_{mp}**, a pixel signal supplied from the pixel **72_{mp}** of the pixel array **72** to the comparator **76_{mp}**, a comparative signal supplied from the comparator **76_{mp}** to the latch circuit **78_{mp}**, and a count value 15 latched by the latch circuit **78_{mp}**, are plotted in the top-down order, plotting time as the abscissa.

The slope generating circuit **75** supplies the slope signal whose voltage drops at a constant slope from an initial voltage, as shown at the first plot from the top in FIG. 4.

During the time the slope signal voltage drops from the initial voltage, there are a reset phase having a predetermined duration and a signal output phase having a longer duration than the reset phase. The slope signal is a signal causing a reset phase and a signal output phase subsequent 20 to the reset phase to be repeated in one set form.

The pixel **72_{mp}** of the pixel array **72** supplies a pixel signal to the comparator **76_{mp}** according to the output control signal supplied from the vertical scanning circuit **71**, as shown at the second plot from the top in FIG. 4.

In the solid-state image pickup device **51**, light enters the pixel **72_{mp}** in the signal output phase, whereas the light entering into the pixel **72_{mp}** is intercepted in the reset phase.

As a result, in the reset phase, noise components are supplied as a pixel signal from the pixel **72_{mp}** to the comparator **76_{mp}**. During the signal output phase, a pixel signal containing a charge-based signal component corresponding to the light receiving amount of a photodiode (not shown) is supplied from the pixel **72_{mp}** to the comparator **76_{mp}**.

As shown at the third plot from the top in FIG. 4, the comparator **76_{mp}** compares the slope signal and the pixel signal, and supplies an H (high) level comparative signal to the latch circuit **78_{mp}** when the pixel signal voltage is smaller than the slope signal voltage, and supplies an L (low) level comparative signal to the latch circuit **78_{mp}** when the pixel signal voltage is larger than the slope signal voltage.

Here, the initial voltage of the slope signal is larger than the maximum value of voltages attainable by the pixel signal. Accordingly, as the slope signal voltage drops from the initial voltage, the slope signal voltage is changed from a voltage larger than the pixel signal to a voltage coinciding with the pixel signal. The change of the slope signal voltage from the voltage larger than the pixel signal to the voltage coinciding with the pixel signal causes the comparative signal to be inverted from the H level to the L level.

As presented in the fourth plot from the top (the lowermost) of FIG. 4, the comparator **78_{mp}** stores according to the comparative signal from the comparator **76_{mp}**, the count values (the counted pulses) obtained by the counters **77_m**, corresponding to a period of time that the slope signal voltage is changed from the initial voltage to the voltage coinciding with the pixel signal, and supplies the count values to the circuit of the subsequent stage (not shown).

That is, the latch circuit **78_{mp}** stores the count values counted by the counters **77_m** (reset phase count values Cp) in the period between the time when the slope signal voltage

starts to drop in the reset phase and the time when the comparative signal is inverted from the H level to the L level. Thereafter, the latch circuit **78_{mp}** stores the count values counted by the counters **77_m** (signal output phase count values Cd) in the period between the time when the slope signal voltage starts to drop in the signal output phase and the time when the comparative signal is inverted from the H level to the L level. The latch circuit **78_{mp}** supplies successively the reset phase count values Cp and the signal output phase count values Cd to the circuit of the subsequent stage (not shown).

In the circuit of the subsequent stage, a digital CDS (corrected double sampling) is performed to obtain a difference Cp-Cd between the reset phase count value Cp and the signal output phase count value Cd, and the difference Cp-Cd is outputted as signal components of pixel data.

As described with reference to FIG. 3, owing to the arrangement that in each of the plurality of circuit blocks **BL₁** to **BL_M**, the single counter **77_m** is shared among P columns (P sets of the comparator **76_{mp}** and the latch circuit **78_{mp}**), the number of counters can be reduced to a 1/P than the arrangement that one counter is provided for every column. This enables the suppression of circuit area, reducing power consumption.

This is effective to prevent circuit area and power consumption from being increased with increasing the number of pixels and the processing speed in future solid-state image pickup devices.

The counters **77_m** may be noise generating source because they operate almost all of the circuit operating time. However, the solid-state image pickup device **51** requires less number of the counters **77_m**, thereby achieving a noise reduction.

Although the individual counters **77_m** are shared among the columns the number of which is P in the foregoing description, the circuit blocks **BL_m** may have different numbers of columns P sharing the individual counters **77_m**.

Preferably, the numbers of columns P sharing the single counter **77_m** is determined (optimized) by considering the delay due to wire resistance and wire capacity when the solid-state image pickup device **51** is operated at high speed.

FIG. 5 is a block diagram showing a configuration example of the solid-state image pickup device in which a single counter is shared among all columns.

A solid-state image pickup device **111** of FIG. 5 includes comparators **131₁** to **131₂₇₀₀** the number of which is 2700, a counter **132**, and latch circuits **133₁** to **133₂₇₀₀** the number of which is 2700. In the solid state image pickup device **111**, the single counter **132** is shared among 2700 columns (2700 sets of a comparator **131_i** and a latch circuit **133_i** (i is an integer in the range 1 to 2700)).

The comparators **131₁** to **131₂₇₀₀**, the counter **132**, and the latch circuits **133₁** to **133₂₇₀₀** in FIG. 5 have the same basic operations as the comparator **76_{mp}**, the counter **77_m** and the latch circuit **78_{mp}**, respectively, and the description thereof is omitted here.

For example, assuming that the counter **132** counts count values in DDR (double data rate) method by setting the operating frequency at 300 MHz, the count value is incremented by one for 1.67 nsec. It is also assumed that the count value of the counter **132** is sequentially propagated to the latch circuits **133₁** to **133₂₇₀₀** in this order.

It is further assumed that the wire resistance between the adjacent latch circuits **133_i** and **133_{i+1}** is 0.7Ω and the wire capacity therebetween is 1.48 fF.

In this case, the wire resistance R between the latch circuit **133₁** having the shortest distance to the counter **132** and the

latch circuit **133**₁₇₀₀ having the longest distance to the counter **132** is approximately 2 k Ω ($\approx 2700 \times 0.7\Omega$), and the wire capacity C therebetween is approximately 4 pF ($\approx 2700 \times 1.48 \times 10^{-15}$ F).

FIG. 6 is a circuit diagram modeling wire resistance and wire capacity generated in the solid-state image pickup device **111** of FIG. 5.

In FIG. 6, the latch circuit **133**₁ having the shortest distance to the counter **132** is represented by point A, and the latch circuit **133**₂₇₀₀ having the longest distance to the counter **132** is represented by point B. The wire resistance R and the wire capacity C between the points A and B are modeled by an n-type circuit.

When a simulation is performed using the circuit shown in FIG. 6, a 1.78 nsec delay occurs between the count pulse (the count value) supplied from the counter **132** to the latch circuit **133**₁ and the count pulse supplied from the counter **132** to the latch circuit **133**₂₇₀₀.

This delay is greater than 1.67 nsec for one count of the counter **132**, and a difference of one count occurs between the count value in the column having the shortest distance to the counter **132** and the count value in the column having the longest distance to the counter **132**.

Accordingly, in circuit of the subsequent stage (not shown) to which the count values from the latch circuits **133**₁ to **133**₂₇₀₀ are supplied, when pixel data are outputted by subjecting the count values to gain multiplication by a predetermined number, a 1 count difference of the count value in the pixel data outputted is increased to a 4 count difference in a 4 \times gain multiplication, a 8 count difference in a 8 \times gain multiplication, and a 16 count difference in a 16 \times gain multiplication.

On the other hand, assuming in the example of FIG. 5 that the number of columns is 675 ($=2700/4$) and a single counter **132** is shared among the 675 columns, the wire resistance and the wire capacity between the column having the shortest distance to the counter **132** and the column having the longest distance to the counter **132** are an approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of the case where a single counter **132** is shared among 2700 columns. That is, the wire resistance R is approximately 0.47 k Ω ($\approx 675 \times 0.7\Omega$), and the wire capacity C is approximately 1 pF ($\approx 675 \times 1.48 \times 10^{-15}$ F).

When the single counter **132** is shared among the 675 columns and the simulation is performed by using the circuit shown in FIG. 6, a 0.31 nsec delay occurs between the counted pulse supplied to the latch circuit **133**₁ having the shortest distance to the counter **132** and the counted pulse supplied to the latch circuit **133**₆₇₅ having the longest distance to the counter **132**. The value 0.31 nsec is sufficiently smaller than 1.67 nsec that is the time corresponding to the 1 count of the counter **132**. Consequently, there is no difference between the count value in the column having the shortest distance to the counter **132** and the count value in the column having the longest distance to the counter **132**.

Thus, deterioration of image quality can be prevented while reducing the power consumption of the solid-state image pickup device **111**, by setting the number of columns sharing a single counter **132** so that the delay due to the wire resistance R and the wire capacity C when the solid-state image pickup device **111** is operated at high speed becomes sufficiently smaller than the time required for a 1 count.

That is, when the number of columns of the solid-state image pickup device **111** is 2700 as in the case of FIG. 5, the reduction in power consumption and the prevention of deterioration in image quality can be achieved by setting four counters similar to the counter **132** so that a single counter **132** is shared among 675 columns.

FIG. 7 is a block diagram showing a configuration example of the solid-state image pickup device according to another embodiment of the present invention.

In FIG. 7, the same references have been used as in FIG. 3 for similar components, and the description thereof is omitted.

A solid-state image pickup device **151** of FIG. 7 is identical to the solid-state image pickup device **51** of FIG. 3 in that the device **151** includes a vertical scanning circuit **71**, a pixel array **72**, a slope generating circuit **75**, and circuit blocks BL₁ to BL_M the number of which is M, except for the following point.

That is, in the solid-state image pickup device **151** shown in FIG. 7, a column of vertically aligned pixels in a second circuit block BL_{m+1} among the circuit blocks BL₁ to BL_M the number of which is M is arranged between two columns of vertically aligned pixels in a circuit block BL_m. In the solid-state image pickup device **51** shown in FIG. 3, the column in the circuit block BL_{m+1} is not arranged between the two columns in the first circuit block BL_m.

More specifically, pixels **72**₂₁ to **72**_{2P} in the circuit block BL₂ are arranged between pixels **72**₁₁ to **72**_{1P} in the circuit block BL₁, respectively.

Similarly, pixels **72**_{M1} to **72**_{MP} in the circuit block BL_M are arranged between pixels **72**_{(M-1)1} to **72**_{(M-1)P} in the circuit block BL_{M-1}, respectively.

That is, in the pixel array **72** of FIG. 7, pixels **72**₁₁ to **72**_{MP} the number of which is M \times P are arranged horizontally, and the order thereof is different from that in the configuration of FIG. 3. These pixels are arranged in the following order: the pixels **72**₁₁, **72**₂₁, **72**₂₂, . . . , **72**_{1P}, **72**_{2P}, . . . , **72**_{(m-1)P}, **72**_{mp}, . . . , **72**_{(M-1)1}, **72**_{M1}, . . . , **72**_{(M-1)P} and **72**_{MP}.

Thus, in the solid-state image pickup device **151**, instead of the configuration that a single counter **77**_m is shared among the adjacent pixels (columns), a single counter **77**_m is shared among pixels (columns) arranged every other pixel columns.

The solid-state image pickup device **151** shown in FIG. 7 has a function of pixel addition (pixel signal addition), so-called binning function.

That is, the solid-state image pickup device **151** in FIG. 7 has a binning function of performing pixel addition between two horizontally adjacent pixels, namely, pixels **72**₁₁ and **72**₂₁, pixels **72**₁₂, and **72**₂₂, . . . , pixels **72**_{1P} and **72**_{2P}, . . . , respectively. When the binning function is turned on, the pixel signals of the horizontally adjacent pixels **72**_{mp} and **72**_{(m+1)p} are added, and the pixel signal as the result of addition is supplied through a vertical signal line **73**_{mp} to a comparator **76**_{mp}.

At this time, it is unnecessary to process the pixel signals on the vertical signal line **73**_{(m+1)p}. Accordingly, in the circuit block BL_{m+1} of the circuit block BL_m and the circuit block BL_{m+1}, the latch circuit **78**_{(m+1)p} is not required to operate, and the counter **77**_{m+1} connected to the latch circuit **78**_{(m+1)p} is also not required to operate, where m=1, 3, . . . , M-1.

Thus, the counter **77**_{m+1} in the circuit block BL_{m+1}, connected to the vertical signal line **73**_{(m+1)p} not used to supply the pixel signal as the result of addition, is not required to operate during the addition of pixels (when the binning function is turned on), permitting a further reduction in power consumption.

In the above description, the addition of pixels is performed between the two horizontally adjacent pixels. Without limiting to this, the addition of pixels may be performed among two horizontally adjacent pixels and two vertically

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adjacent pixels (2×2 pixels) or a total of four pixels, or alternatively among 3×3 pixels or a total of nine pixels.

In addition to the binning function, pixel thinning out (pixel signal thinning out) function may be imparted to the solid-state image pickup device 151 of FIG. 7.

That is, the solid-state image pickup device 151 in FIG. 7 has the pixel thinning out function to perform pixel thinning out of the pixels 72_{21} , 72_{22} , . . . , 72_{2P} , and $72_{(m+1)p}$. When the pixel thinning out function is turned on, the pixel signal of the pixel $72_{(m+1)p}$ is thinned out, eliminating the necessity of processing the pixel signals on the vertical signal line $73_{(m+1)p}$. Therefore, in the circuit block BL_{m+1} of the circuit block BL_m and the circuit block BL_{m+1} , the latch circuit $78_{(m+1)p}$ is not required to operate, and the counter 77_{m+1} connected to the latch circuit $78_{(m+1)p}$ is also not required to operate, where $m=1, 3, \dots, M-1$.

Thus, the counter 77_{m+1} of the circuit block connected to the vertical signal line $73_{(m+1)p}$ not used to supply the pixel signal as a pixel thinning out result, is not required to operate during the pixel thinning out, permitting a further reduction in power consumption.

In the above description, the pixel thinning out is performed every other pixel (every other column). Without limiting to this, the pixel thinning out may be performed every two or more pixels (every two or more columns).

FIG. 8 is a block diagram showing a configuration example of still other embodiment of the solid-state image pickup device to which the present invention is applied.

In FIG. 8, the same references have been used as in FIG. 3 for similar components, and the description thereof is omitted.

A solid-state image pickup device 251 of FIG. 8 is identical to the solid-state image pickup device 51 of FIG. 3 in that circuit blocks BL_m have counters 77_m . The solid-state image pickup device 251 is different from the solid-state image pickup device 51 in that the circuit blocks BL_m have P/2 pieces of current sources 74_{mp} , comparators 76_{mp} and latch circuits 78_{mp} , and P/2 pieces of switches 271_{mp} .

Under control of a controller (not shown), the switches 271_{mp} selectively supply pixel signals supplied from vertical signal lines $73_{m(2p-1)}$ and $73_{m(2p)}$ to the comparators 76_{mp} .

Thus, the solid-state image pickup device 251 has the configuration that a single comparator 76_{mp} is shared between two pixels (two columns) $72_{m(2p-1)}$ and $72_{m(2p)}$.

Although in FIG. 8, a single comparator 76_{mp} is shared between the two pixels (columns) $72_{m(2p-1)}$ and $72_{m(2p)}$, a single comparator 76_{mp} may be shared among more than two pixels (columns) or n pixels (n columns).

Unlike the Patent Document 1 having P/2 arrangements that a single A/D converter (the comparator and the counter) is shared among n columns, the solid-state image pickup device 251 has the arrangement that a counter is shared among P/2 arrangements that a comparator and a latch circuit are shared among n columns. Therefore, the number of counters needed for $n \times (P/2)$ columns can be reduced from P/2 to one, permitting a reduction in power consumption.

As described above, the solid-state image pickup device 51, the solid-state image pickup device 151 and the solid-state image pickup device 251 are capable of reducing the number of the counters 77_m , thereby reducing power consumption than the case of providing a counter for every column. That is, in each of the plurality of circuit blocks BL_m , the plurality of comparators 76_{mp} compare a pixel signal supplied through a vertical signal line connected to vertically aligned pixels 72_{mp} among the plurality of pixels arranged in the matrix, and the slope signal whose voltage is changed at the constant slope from the predetermined

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initial voltage. In accordance with the comparison results of the comparators 76_{mp} , the plurality of latch circuits 78_{mp} store the count values obtained by the counters 77_m , corresponding to an elapsed time from when the slope signal voltage is changed from the initial voltage to the voltage coinciding with the pixel signal.

Although the latch circuits 78_{mp} store the count values in the embodiments described above, a sample-hold circuit or other storage media may store the count values.

Although there has been shown herein and described certain embodiments of the invention, it will be understood that many changes and modifications may be made therein without departing from the spirit or scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. An imaging device comprising:
 - a pixel array comprising a plurality of pixels;
 - a plurality of signal lines, each of which is coupled to at least one pixel in the pixel array;
 - a reference signal generation circuit;
 - a plurality of comparators, each of which is coupled to at least two of the plurality of signal lines and the reference signal generation circuit; and
 - a plurality of counters, wherein each of the plurality of counters is coupled to at least two comparators of the plurality of comparators.
2. The imaging device according to claim 1, further comprising a plurality of switching circuits, wherein each of the plurality of comparators is coupled to at least two of the plurality of signal lines through one of the plurality of switching circuits.
3. The imaging device according to claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of signal lines extends in a first direction, and wherein the plurality of counters are arranged in a second direction different from the first direction.
4. The imaging device according to claim 3, wherein the second direction is perpendicular to the first direction.
5. The imaging device according to claim 4, wherein the plurality of pixels in the pixel array are arranged in a matrix of columns and rows, wherein the first direction corresponds to a column direction in the matrix, and wherein the second direction corresponds to a row direction in the matrix.
6. The imaging device according to claim 1, wherein the imaging device comprises a single reference signal generation circuit.
7. The imaging device according to claim 1, wherein the each of the plurality of counters is coupled to the at least two comparators via at least one latch circuit.
8. The imaging device according to claim 1, wherein the plurality of counters includes four counters.
9. The imaging device according to claim 1, wherein the reference signal generation circuit is configured to output a reference signal.
10. The imaging device according to claim 9, wherein the reference signal is a slope signal having a voltage that changes from an initial voltage at a constant slope.
11. An imaging device comprising:
 - a plurality of pixels arranged in a matrix of columns and rows, the plurality of pixels including a first pixel in an i th column, a second pixel in an $(i+1)$ th column, a third pixel in a j th column, and a fourth pixel in a $(j+1)$ th column;
 - a first switching circuit;
 - a second switching circuit;
 - a first comparator coupled to the first pixel and the second pixel through the first switching circuit;

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a second comparator coupled to the third pixel and the fourth pixel through the second switching circuit; and a first counter coupled to the first comparator and the second comparator.

12. The imaging device according to claim **11**, further comprising a reference signal generation circuit, wherein each of the first comparator and the second comparator is coupled to the reference signal generation circuit.

13. The imaging device according to claim **12**, wherein the imaging device comprises a single reference signal generation circuit.

14. The imaging device according to claim **12**, wherein the reference signal generation circuit is configured to output a reference signal, wherein the first comparator is configured to compare the reference signal to a voltage on the first signal line and a voltage on the second signal line, and wherein the second comparator is configured to compare the reference signal to a voltage on the third signal line and a voltage on the fourth signal line.

15. The imaging device according to claim **14**, wherein the reference signal is a slope signal having a voltage that changes from an initial voltage at a constant slope.

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16. The imaging device according to claim **11**, wherein the first comparator is coupled to the first pixel via a first signal line, and the second pixel via a second signal line, and

wherein the second comparator is coupled to the third pixel via a third signal line, and the fourth pixel via a fourth signal line.

17. The imaging device according to claim **16**, wherein each of the first, second, third, and fourth signal lines extends in a first direction, and

wherein the first comparator and the second comparator are arranged in a second direction different from the first direction.

18. The imaging device according to claim **17**, wherein the second direction is perpendicular to the first direction.

19. The imaging device according to claim **18**, wherein the first direction corresponds to a column direction the matrix, and the second direction corresponds to a row direction in the matrix.

20. The imaging device according to claim **11**, wherein the first counter is coupled to the first comparator via at least one latch circuit.

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